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ABSTRACT

Currently the overall philosophy of many basic writing programs is one of inclusion rather than exclusion. First-year students are seen as part of the writing community, instead of continuing the mindset where students were sent off to "take this remedial class and then you'll be ready for English 101." At Arizona State University (ASU) a "Stretch Program" (English 101 is "stretched over two semesters) is designed specifically for those students who lack experience with the kinds of writing they will be asked to do at ASU. The program gives them more time to develop effective writing strategies and experience that will help them in all of their university classes. More universities are moving into a focus on computer-mediated instruction, helping students become accustomed to the technological culture on the university campus. Many instructors focus on reading as well as writing in the basic writing classroom and directly incorporate writing centers into their curriculum and pedagogy. At ASU, about 90% of students who complete the "Stretch" sequence believe their writing has improved. Similar basic writing programs are in place at San Francisco State University, the University of Minnesota's General College, Indiana University Southeast, and CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. (CR)

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The "Mainstreaming+" Approach

Gregory R. Glau

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G. Glau

When I wrote my proposal for this presentation, my first paragraph went something like this

While our conversations about basic skills instruction continue in our journals, at our conferences, and on our listserves, one story is just beginning to be told, one we might call the "Mainstreaming-PLUS" approach Instead of relegating "basic skills" students to the sidelines or mainstreaming them by putting everyone into the same class, more and more of us are creating programs designed specifically for our own student populations and we are developing curriculums in unique ways That is, many of us believe that there is a middle ground between the "you don't belong at the university" and the "sink or swim" approach and today I want to outline some of what's happening

But as I read through and worked to put together all the information I was sent from people around the country, telling me what they and their colleges and universities are doing in terms of Basic Writing, it quickly became clear that in the 15 or so minutes I have today it would be impossible to outline--with any kind of accurate description or detail--everything about even one specific program, even about the program I'm involved with

So, I thought it might be worthwhile to focus just on a few highlights of what's going on in basic writing programs, to give you a sense of what some of us are doing, and

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to list in a handout and bibliography where you can find the more detailed information (which I won't give you now, as if I do you'd all read it instead of listening to me).

I'm going start with a broad overview and then I'll touch on aspects of several programs, including ours at Arizona State University, where our *Stretch Program* gives students two semesters of writing experience for ENG 101--we "stretch" ENG 101 over two semesters. And that's not quite accurate, as while they do four papers plus a portfolio analysis in ENG 101, we do six papers and two portfolios, so we're really "stretched and expanded" ENG 101. I also want to outline some of what they do in the Writing Studio Program at the University of South Carolina, where students identified as needing extra help meet in small groups every week for both expert and peer assistance. An interesting difference between the Writing Studio approach and our *Stretch* concept is that at South Carolina they bring students from any number of ENG 101 classes together for their small group meetings, while we, at Arizona State, try to keep the same group of students together over two semesters. Yet, they both seem to help student writing and student retention.

I will also touch on the Basic Writing sequence at San Francisco State, the program at the University of Minnesota's General College, Indiana University Southeast, and CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. But please remember that what I'll mention today is just the . . . tip of the iceberg, as people and programs are creating innovative curriculum all over the country.

Let's start with a broad overview. It seems to me that currently the OVERALL PHILOSOPHY of many BW programs is one of inclusion rather than exclusion, of seeing first-year students as part of the writing community, instead the previous mindset

where students were sent off to "take this remedial class and then you'll be ready for ENG 101." Part of the reason for such an approach is political, schools that have an easily-identifiable Basic Writing program--as you'll soon hear--are easy targets for politicians and (sadly) for administrators who characterize those programs as "remedial, so they don't belong here."

In any case, many of us subscribe to the beliefs I outline for our *Stretch Program*

The *Stretch Program* is designed specifically for those university students who lack experience with the kinds of writing they will be asked to do at ASU--students who have good ideas and who may be effective writers in some situations, but who have minimal training and experience with academic writing. *Stretch* gives these students more time to develop effective writing strategies-- extended experience at working with many and various ways of both reading and writing--strategies and experience that will help them in all of their university classes.

As Bill Robinson says, at San Francisco State their basic writing classes are not seen as preparatory, and their "1st premise [is]: not to prepare students for freshman ENG but to prepare for "all the academic work they have to do."

Again from a wide perspective, a real focus on LOCAL ISSUES and the local student population is one all basic writing programs seem to share. This is both a problem and a challenge, as it's often difficult to generalize that what works at one school will then work at another, but at the same time, as with any good pedagogy, it seems to me that we want to design our programs for the student populations we serve. As Terry Collins comments about the University of Minnesota: "only local decisions will have power . . . as we search for ways to better serve . . . students whose inexperience with prestige-valorized writing marks them as pariah in specific elitist colleges and universities."

Or as Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson from South Carolina warn us, to anyone who might be interested in adapting or creating a program like the their Writing Studio, "we emphasize the need to look carefully at your own academic context--at other institutional programs and their history, students, and teachers. As we have come to know other basic writing programs in our region, we have seen that every situation is unique."

Put another way, and perhaps this approach has always been there, we all try to deal with and help our own specific student population, within the context of local political pressures and problems.

Let's narrow the focus now to more specific areas--placement, pedagogy, assessment, and so on. Today, there's a real variety in how students are PLACED into Basic Writing classes. At Arizona State University, we place students based on their ACT or SAT scores, at the University of Minnesota, students come from the "lower two quartiles" (their High School rank combined with their ACT scores). At the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, students are placed based on the reading and writing test scores, and at San Francisco State, Basic Writing students almost always are identified as poor readers, too. I'm jealous of what they do at Indiana University Southeast, where they base placement on a holistically-graded placement essay, and I'm really jealous of our sister institution, the University of Arizona in Tucson, where they combine a student's high school GPA with his or her ACT or SAT score and the results of a holistically-graded placement test.

At Grand Valley State University in Michigan, Dan Royer and Roger Gillis are currently working with self-placement, where students are told about their options and then "rate themselves" as writers, based on specific criteria.

At the University of South Carolina, they have a "Special first-week-of-class placement process," where students can self-identify themselves as needing extra help, during the first two weeks of the semester, teachers also assign both an in-class and a take-home essay, which teachers use to advise students to enroll in their Writing Studio class--small groups that meet once a week to read and discuss each others' writing.

Many of us who administer basic writing programs work very hard, too, to explain to students how and why they're placed where they are, for students need to understand why they're doing what we ask them to do. As Grego and Thompson note, at South Carolina, "We want to get any initial reactions out "on the table" for discussion so that we can talk about how the Freshman English curriculum worked in the past, how we've changed it for the better (according to student testimonials from previous years), and what the Studio won't do, as well as what we hope it will." We do the same at Arizona State, as when teachers discuss my handout that explains the *Stretch Program*, they also discuss placement and the good things about what we do. I know they do the same at the University of Arizona, too. These open discussions help to diffuse student (and parent) anger at our placement process.

No matter how students are placed, our basic writing programs serve a diverse Student Population. At Arizona State, for instance, while about 21 percent of our overall student population comes from underrepresented groups (Asian American, African American, Hispanic, or Native American), nearly 40 percent of our *Stretch Program* students come from those groups. Put another way, while one student in five in our general population is a member of an underrepresented group, two out of every five of our basic writing students come from those underrepresented student groups.

At Minnesota, Terry Collins reports that students in their General College "tend to be economically poorer and more racially diverse (by a factor of three) than are students in the University of MN at large." Terry says, "they are more likely to be single parents, to be first-generation college students, or to use a language other than English in their homes than are their peers in the University at large."

In terms of working with these diverse student populations, one thing that all of us have in common is that we try to limit Class Size. At San Francisco State, for example, where they run two "tiers" of basic writing, classes are capped at 14 students for the lower-scoring group and 18 for the upper-scoring group, at Minnesota, they're also capped at 18, and at Arizona State, we cap our *Stretch* classes at 22. And, as I mentioned earlier, South Carolina asks students in their Writing Studio to meet in small groups of 4-5 students.

More of us are moving to a real focus on Computer-mediated Instruction, as Geoffrey Sirc notes, at Minnesota computer-mediated classrooms "help students become accustomed to the technological culture on the University campus, including helping students use computers as tools to help them through the writing process, helping them use email as a form of communication, understanding ways in which a-synchronous (and synchronous) computer programs can play important roles in their studies and in the process of academic writing, and helping them use on-line resources like full-text databases and the World Wide Web in their research." At Arizona State, fully 60 percent of our *Stretch Program* classes are in computer-mediated classrooms, for both semesters.

Many of us focus on reading as well as writing in our classrooms, at San Francisco State, for instance, basic writing students concurrently take a reading class.

One common theme that we all appear to buy into is that students--especially basic writers--benefit from having more time. As I've mentioned, at Arizona State we "stretch" ENG 101 over two semesters, at South Carolina, ENG 101 students meet in small groups apart from their regular classes, at Minnesota, there are extra meeting hours built-into the program. Earlier I mentioned the "two-tiered approach" at San Francisco State, the upper group takes a one semester class, while the lower takes a 2 semester sequence, as in our *Stretch* sequence, both do the same work but the "lower" group gets more time. Pat Licklider notes that at John Jay, basic writing students meet two hours per day, four days a week, with even more optional time over Christmas break and during the summer. As Pat says, the idea "is that students are more likely to improve their command of a language, in this case, written English, the more they practice it."

In addition to giving basic writers more time, many of us also directly incorporate our Writing Centers into our curriculum and pedagogy. At Arizona State, for instance, all first-semester *Stretch* students must visit a writing center tutor for each of his or her papers. At South Carolina, the WC staff group leaders keep in contact with the students' instructors through a special "dialogue form."

So, to quickly summarize: while any generalization is dangerous, we can kind of say that . . . basic writing students are being included rather than excluded; curriculum and pedagogy focuses on local students and their needs; there is still a wide range of placement processes; we serve a truly diverse student population, often with a large proportion of students from historically underrepresented groups; we concentrate on small class size and on giving students more time; we usually have direct links to the writing center and other support services, and many of us are moving to computer-meditated classrooms.

I want to end by touching on Assessment--is what we're doing working? One way to examine assessment is in terms of student perceptions. At Minnesota, students evaluate the BW classes "very favorably." As Geoff Sirc noted, several studies asked

students about the effectiveness of the writing curriculum at Minnesota, and each [study] has indicated that students who have transferred from the [general] college and gone on to pursue a four-year degree cite writing courses as some of the most valuable and effective of their General College careers. At Arizona State, about 90 percent of students who complete our *Stretch* sequence tell us that they think their writing has improved--and I have more than 1,400 student surveys to prove it.

The students at South Carolina echo my own students--Grego and Thompson report that about 90 percent of their students "were very positive after [they] overcame their initial fears that the Studio might be the 'same old kind of remedial work' many had been required to do in the past. When asked what they had expected, some were relieved that they were not stuck in large classes. They were pleasantly surprised at how helpful the Studio was for their 101 courses and for leaning to write for different professors."

But in addition to anecdotal evidence, I'm very pleased to note that many of us are coming up with hard data that support our basic writing programs.

In terms of retention, at Minnesota, for example, students who do NOT complete the BW sequence, or avoid it, or put it off, DROP OUT at a higher rate than those who complete the sequence. At San Francisco State, only 1 to 2 percent of students drop out of their basic writing sequence.

In terms of writing improvement, at Indiana University Southeast, Bill Sweigart reports that their two-course "developmental" sequence causes real, measurable gains in student writing.

When Minnesota's basic writers take the next writing class (intermediate comp or an upper division writing class) they pass at the same rate as other, regular students. At

South Carolina, students in the Writing Studio program pass ENG 101 at a better than 94 percent rate. At Arizona State, *Stretch* students pass ENG 101 at a 6 percent higher rate than those who take "regular" ENG 101. But more impressive is our basic writing students also pass the next class in our sequence, the research-focused ENG 102 class, also at a 6 percent higher rate than other ENG 102 students. My key point, in a document that I sent around to everyone in upper administration who I could think of (and which elicited a hand-written note from Arizona State's President, as well as notes from our Provost and the Dean of our college) is that we've taken students with the lowest test scores, twice as many who come from historically underrepresented groups, and made them the best ENG 102 students. Those are the kinds of messages we want to continue to send.

Finally, a fitting conclusion, it seems to me, is to quote Minnesota's Terry Collins, for he echoes what many of us are doing. Terry writes,

Over the past decade we jettisoned a very ineffective series of non-credit courses, dumped a useless placement tool, decreased class size to increase instructor~student contact, rewrote the credit-bearing curriculum based on multicultural education principles and the best practices we could locate in the basic writing and Composition literature, shifted the pedagogy toward a collaboratively designed workshop format, built sufficient capacity so that all sections meet all the time in networked computer classrooms, and shifted to a collaborative administrative, training, and mentoring model.

That's what happening in successful basic writing programs, right now.